DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 094 393 CS 201 438

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TITLE Listening: An Instructional Imperative.
PUB DATE Aug 68
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English (1st, Calgary, Alberta, August 1968)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Auditory Training; Communication Skills; Elementary Education; Instructional Materials; *Listening Comprehension; Listening Habits; *Listening Skills; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that listening skills can be improved through direct and indirect instruction in listening; that reading and listening comprehension skills are closely related; that they both involve the same mental processes; and that instruction in either skill affects the other favorably. Little emphasis is placed on teaching listening skills because of the following misconceptions: (1) listening is a matter of intelligence; (2) children's listening ability is determined by hearing acuity; (3) children listen automatically; and (4) teaching reading is more important than teaching listening. A behavioral definition of listening is "the act of hearing sound sequences or patterns, purposefully directing attention to these, and actively applying appropriate cognitive skills which result in the listener's obtaining meanings, forming concepts, interpreting data, and predicting outcomes from these patterns." To be effective, instruction in listening must be on three levels--sensory, perceptual, and cognitive. This instruction should be developed throughout the child's school career. The teacher should identify behavioral objectives and select only the best and most recent materials when teaching listening skills. (SW)

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Listening: An Instructional Imperative*

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The dictionary defines "imperative" as: "not to be avoided or evaded; obligatory, binding, compulsory--as an imperative task."

The teaching of listening is an instructional imperative. It is obligatory, binding, and compulsory, without instruction in listening, the communication act is seriously hampered. Educators agree that the teaching of effective and efficient communication is an instructional imperative. Nevertheless, specific instruction in the essential communication skill of listening is sadly lacking in most current school programs at every grade level.

Communication, the act of exchanging ideas or information, requires a skilled sender, a reacting receiver, and a message coded in a medium that both sender and receiver can comprehend. The sender may be highly skilled (rarely is there any argument concerning the importance of teaching oral and written expression); the message may be clearly coded (grammar and usage, spelling, and handwriting are accepted facets of the language arts program); but if the receiver isn't listening effectively there is no communication.

*Presented at the First Annual Conference of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English at Calgary, Alberta, in August, 1968.

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Too often, listening is confused with hearing. The fact that the receiver can hear does not mean that he will automatically learn to listen. I am reminded of the reading group which I observed in which each child was asked to read in rotational order--counterclockwise. The teacher had commented to me prior to the start of the lesson that the oral reading would be followed by a worksheet containing comprehension questions, a usual reading routine for that group. However, at one point in the lesson, possibly because I was there, the teacher stopped one child who had just completed reading aloud three lengthy paragraphs and asked him to describe the content of these paragraphs in his own words. Visibly confused by this unexpected change in procedure, the youngster responded, "I don't know what it said. I wasn't listening."

The notion that the teaching of listening is an instructional imperative is not new--it has simply been ignored. As early as 1928, it was reported that adults spend 45% of their time in listening, as opposed to 30% in speaking, 16% in reading, and 9% in writing (Rankin, 1928). Nevertheless, during the next several decades, reading instruction was stressed to the virtual exclusion of instruction in the other receptive skill of listening. During that same period, research in reading was also emphasized almost to the exclusion of research in listening. Nichols (1940) reported that, as of 1939, only 14 research studies in listening had been published in the United States and England, in contrast to 1,951 such studies in reading.

While there has been a strong recent upsurge in studies concerned with listening, the amount of research in listening as opposed to reading remains very low.

As early as 1940, Goldstein (1940) reported that a person can listen to speech at a rate of more than three times that at which he normally hears it. However, it is only just recently that attention has been given to closing the gap between ability to listen and actual time involved in listening through such media as time-compressed speech. Ten years later, Wilt (1950) reported that teachers estimated that children spent 25% of their school day in listening when the children in fact spent 57.5% of their day in listening--more than in any other communication activity, including reading. Most of this listening time was spent in listening to the teachers, who were apparently unaware that what pupils were doing when teachers were talking could be classified as listening! Research has further indicated that the assumption that the able speaker is a good listener is unfounded, and that the teaching of oral expressive skills does not necessarily result in the learning of oral receptive skills (Brilhart, 1965). In addition, incidental instruction in listening has not been found to result in either effective or efficient learning. It has been found that about 50% of adults comprehend very little and retain even less of what they hear in an ordinary informational talk, while students at the secondary and college level comprehend, on the average,

only about half or less than half of what they hear (Vernon, 1950; Brown, 1950; Cartier, 1955). Since instruction at these levels is generally provided through lectures, it would appear that at least half of a person's educational career is wasted since it does not result in retentive learning.

Studies further reveal that reading and listening comprehension skills are closely related (Duker, 1964); that there is a high positive correlation between the ability to listen and report-card grades, so listening does pay off! (Canfield, 1961); that listening skills can be significantly improved through both direct and indirect (but not incidental) instruction in listening (Canfield, 1961); that reading and listening both involve the same mental processes and that instruction in either skill affects the other favorably (Smith and Dechant, 1961); that during the elementary grades pupils learn more by having material read to them (listening) than by reading it themselves (Larsen and Feder, 1940); and that there are many kinds of listening skills which are relatively independent. Thus, a person who is skilled in listening for recall may not necessarily be skilled in critical listening. Each listening skill must therefore receive specific instructional attention for maximum utility (Duker, 1964).

In view of research findings concerning the importance of listening instruction during the past several decades it is particularly noteworthy that so little emphasis had been placed on the

teaching of listening skills. Logan and Logan (1967), two Canadian authors, suggest that the reason for this inattention may lie in four unfounded assumptions concerning listening.

One such misconception is that listening is largely a matter of intelligence. While there is a positive correlation between listening ability and intelligence, this relationship is not nearly as significant as many have assumed. How well one listens is determined by the extent to which listening skills are developed and used as well as by experience background and interest in the subject. The authors recommend that teachers reject the notion that the bright child will learn without training in listening and that the slow one won't learn under any conditions.

A second misconception is that children's listening ability is determined by hearing acuity. Logan and Logan comment that only three to six percent of the school population suffers from hearing defects sufficiently severe to impair learning in the classroom. They point out that what is regarded as hearing loss is often merely a matter of inattention, boredom, indifference, or individual differences in listening comprehension skill.

A third misconception is the concept that children listen automatically, and that daily exposure to "teacher-talk" eliminates the need for instruction in listening. Since more than 50% of the school day is spent in listening to their talking, many teachers may feel that

there is no need for systematic, specific listening instruction. It is quite clear, however, that such directions as, "Listen carefully, class," or such threats as "I will not begin until everyone is listening," will neither teach how to listen carefully, nor guarantee that the pupils are indeed listening at all. Again, I am reminded of a student teacher who responded to my question, "How do you know which children are listening?" with, "I know by the way they look." When asked, "How do they look?" the student teacher responded, "They look like they are listening." This kind of circular reasoning has caused many a teacher to be fooled by a pupil who has learned to look as if he was listening when he was in fact tuned out.

The fourth misconception is that teaching reading is more important than teaching listening. Logan and Logan suggest that this may be the most detrimental of the misconceptions in view of the fact that we listen three times as much as we read, that listening has more influence on behavior than reading especially at the elementary grade level, and that the media explosion will result in even more influence through listening than reading in the future.

A BEHAVIORAL DEFINITION OF LISTENING

An examination of the titles and contents of professional articles, as well as chapters in professional texts concerned with listening, reveals a considerable variety of terminology in this area.

Brown, for example, suggests that the term "auding" is more appropriate for teachers than "listening". He defines "auding" as: "the gross process of listening to, recognizing, and interpreting spoken symbols" (Brown, 1954).

Russell and Russell (1959) suggest the inclusion in the definition of the term "observing" and offer this mathematical formula for clarity:

Seeing: observing: reading

= hearing: listening: auding

They further suggest that listening operates at various levels which range from aimless to purposeful, inexact to detailed, and passive to creative. (It should be noted here that they do not suggest that they should so range, but rather that they do.) They identify as included in the HEARING LEVELS activities which involve hearing sounds or words but not reacting beyond bare recognition; intermittent listening--turning the speaker on and off as the mind wanders; and half-listening--following the train of discussion but only closely enough to seize the first opportunity to have one's say. The LISTENING LEVELS include listening passively without observable response, and narrow listening in which the main significance is lost as the listener selects details which may be relatively unimportant but which are familiar or agreeable to him. The AUDING LEVELS involve listening and forming associations with related items from one's own experiences; listening closely enough to get main ideas and supporting

details; listening critically; and appreciative and creative listening with genuine mental and emotional participation. Unfortunately, as these authors suggest, there is much overlapping among these levels, which make them relatively difficult to use for instructional purposes.

Taking their cue from the Russells, another group of writers further define "observing" as the ability to see or hear, recognize, comprehend, and interpret one's visible environment. They suggest a different group of listening-observing levels through which they feel children progress. The simplest level of "observing" is identification or simple recognition. Next is the level of interpretation in terms of functionality. With more mature powers of observation, the level of description is reached. Thus, there is a spectrum of listening-observing powers which includes, at each grade level, an appreciable range of listening-observing abilities (Shane, et.al., 1962). Since this introduces the concept of individual differences, it is more useful for the teacher in preparing instructional sequences in listening.

In another effort to codify the various aspects of the listening skill, Fessingdon (1955) lists seven levels of listening. From simplest to most complex, these include isolating sounds, ideas, arguments or facts; attributing meanings to the factors which have been isolated; integrating these factors with past experiences; inspecting them for relationships; interpreting them for implications; interpolating statements which have been heard; and finally introspection for an understanding of what effect these factors are likely to have on the listener.

It is interesting at this point to note those listening habits which Nichols (1960) has offered as the ten worst in America today, since these appear to be related to Fessendon's listening levels. These habits include: (1) Calling the subject dull--too dry to command the listener's attention, thus allowing the listener to wander off on a mental tangent; (2) Criticizing the speaker--not paying attention because the listener is busy finding fault with the speaker's mannerisms or faults in delivery; (3) Getting overstimulated--reacting so strongly to one part of a presentation that the rest is missed; (4) Listening only for facts--not listening for main ideas and context; (5) Trying to outline everything--not being flexible about what is and isn't outlined; (6) Faking attention--striking an appropriate pose and tuning out; (7) Tolerating distraction--being easily distracted or even creating one's own distractions; (8) Choosing only what's easy--forming the habit of avoiding even moderately difficult expository presentations; (9) Letting emotion-laden words get in the way--tuning out when "fighting words" are used (words such as communist, mother-in-law, etc.); and (10) Wasting the differential between speech and thought speed. Nichols reports that people generally speak at an average rate of 125 words per minute in ordinary conversation. An audience, however, is likely to listen to a speaker at an average rate of 400-500 words per minute. However, the average teacher or lecturer usually slows down to 100 words per minute when speaking before an audience. The differential between speech at a rate of 100 words per minute and easy thought at a rate of 400-500 words a minute is a pitfall which "lures the listener into a false sense of security and breeds mental tangents."

Recent research in the area of learning theory clearly indicates that instruction is most effective when it is based on operational or behavioral definitions and objectives--when the teacher can clearly identify what the learner will be able to do as a result of instruction. A behavioral definition of listening, then, which takes into account the work done in this area over the past years, suggests the following definition:

> Listening is the act of hearing sound sequences or patterns, purposefully directing attention to these, and actively applying appropriate cognitive skills which result in the listener's obtaining meanings, forming concepts, interpreting data, making inferences, and predicting outcomes and consequences from these sound sequences or patterns.

Such a behavioral definition of listening allows for the inclusion of those sensory aspects of hearing which are affected by acuity, binaurality or fusion, auditory fatigue, noise, and masking (interference of one set of sounds with another). Further, it includes active involvement through task attendance as well as those associative and creative aspects of cognition which others refer to as 'auding'. This definition is useful as well in preparing behavioral instructional objectives, which might include, among others, building listening vocabulary; adjusting to dialectic divergencies such as intonation, linguistic structuring, or phonetic variations; and developing

appropriate affective responses to sound sequences. This latter might well prevent the development of such listening faults as allowing emotion-laden words to get in the way of listening or reacting too strongly to a lecture or discussion. Thus, such a definition facilitates the development of appropriate instructional sequences in listening as well as the elimination of blocks to good listening.

DEVELOPING INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCES IN LISTENING

Listening provides the foundation on which all other language arts skills are based. In the developmental scheme, listening precedes speaking, reading, and writing. The person who cannot listen effectively cannot communicate effectively. It is as simple as that.

The definition of listening proposed in this paper requires that instruction be provided at three levels: sensory, perceptual and cognitive. Listening skills must involve ability to function within the idiolect (native speaking patterns) as well as within the formal language of the school. Such skills range from identifying or discriminating between unitary sound patterns (the ticking of a watch, phonemic patterns such as the long and short sound of "a") to determining the meanings of homonyms or homographs in context, translating and comprehending idiomatic expressions, creating visual images, and detecting propaganda.

Perhaps two examples are relevant here. One student of my acquaintance was attending secondary school in a small city in the Southern part of the United States, having just arrived from a totally

different environment. Her biology teacher spent a considerable amount of time during one class period discussing what she interpreted phonetically to be "sails". Since she could not find a meaning for this word which matched the context of the discussion, she thought that she'd better check her perceptions. She went to the teacher at the close of the class period and asked him which "sails" he meant--those on ships or the "sales" in stores. "Why, honey," he replied, "I was talkin' about the white blood cells."

On a recent television program, a knock was heard at the door and a secret agent, who was also a robot, was requested by another secret agent to "answer the door." The robot, who was not programmed for idiomatic speech, responded, "Hello door. Would you repeat the question?" Listeners unversed in the idiom of the school, or arriving at school from a divergent dialectical situation, have the same problem.

Skills which are essential to effective and efficient listening must be isolated and taught under conditions which are both specific and systematic. However, attention must continually be given to the provision of experiences in which functional applications of developing listening skills can be made to expressive and receptive communications situations both in and out of school. For example, a "Man on the Street" unit in which pupils interview each other, parents, neighbors, and others concerning questions of importance to the pupils, and then report to the class with descriptions and evaluations of responses of

interviewees, provides a situation in which the skills of creative and critical listening in interview situations are taught and in which the class is also provided with opportunities for functional listening. Isolated lessons or crash approaches to instruction in or improvement of listening skills may show immediate results in improvement of listening behaviors but these are not likely to be long term.

In order to be effective, instructional sequences in listening must be provided developmentally throughout the child's school career. Provision must be made for individual differences in listening skill growth just as it is made for individual differences in reading. Provision must also be made for corrective and remedial instruction where appropriate.

Instructional sequences should be developed using a series of specific, carefully planned steps. Professional texts currently available to teachers outline a variety of such steps in planning listening instruction. The following series of steps, based on those used by developers of programmed instructional sequences, are equally useful in developing lessons in listening. This series includes the following activities:

1. Selection of subject matter: WHAT shall be taught in this lesson or series of lessons?

2. Description of the learners: WHO shall be taught? What are the characteristics of the learners in terms of specific listening skills as well as other language arts abilities?

3. Preparation of behavioral objectives in terms of the subject matter to be taught and the kinds of learners involved: WHY is the material being taught? What are the criteria for adequate performance? What is the learner expected to do upon conclusion of the instructional sequence?

4. Selection of appropriate methods, activities, and materials: HOW can we best provide instruction to best accomplish the objectives?

5. Evaluation of instruction: HOW WELL has the subject matter been taught in terms of the criteria specified in the objectives.

In selecting the listening skills to be taught at various instructional levels, the teacher must be guided by the best current research information as well as by suggestions in professional journals, texts, and courses of study at the pre-service and in-service levels. There is insufficient evidence currently available as to which instructional emphases are likely to produce the most long-lasting and effective listening results. However, this is probably true of reading and the other language arts areas as well.

Logan and Logan (1967) provide a variety of listening lessons which serve as examples of the appropriate development of instructional sequences in terms of specific steps. In one such lesson, "Listening for Information," they offer as the specific objective: To help children listen to recall facts, ideas, and principles with accuracy. Those behaviors which will indicate that this objective has been met are then specified, including: Noting sequence of ideas, watching for transitional phrases and changes of subject, and relating supporting

ideas. Ten teaching techniques are listed, including establishing a specific purpose for listening, telling students beforehand what to listen to, emphasizing the organization of the talk heard and the like. Seventeen teaching activities are suggested, including answering the telephone and delivering the message accurately, reading a series of paragraphs and having the students select the main idea from a number of statements. Five evaluative questions are also included, as: Did the children act on the information they received? Did they discuss and evaluate on an increasingly mature level?

Professional journals provide a variety of ideas for listening activities. One author (Chambers, 1966) describes the art of story-telling and provides specific suggestions for both the storyteller and the audience to facilitate the development of both speaking and listening skills. Another (Candreva, 1961) discusses the use of language laboratory equipment intended for foreign language instruction as an aid in providing listening instruction at the elementary grade level. Elwin Slack, a teacher in Michigan, shares a rather unique activity in which his class exchanged tape recordings with children in Nome Alaska (Rehage, 1960). He reports that this oral form of pen-pal activity provided the children with highly motivated practice in locating and organizing information, making presentations that held the interest of the audience, and the like. Another writer (Horworth, 1966) describes the development of listening centers in classrooms and suggests

that these are an example of "attempts to optimize more than one aspect of ...uding". Such centers generally include an auto-instructional device consisting of a record player or tape-recorder, earphones, listening materials such as tapes or recordings, and response sheets which are completed by the listeners through the course of the listening experience. Others (Hoffman, 1963) have suggested that carefully structured commercial or teacher-prepared taped lessons eliminate extraneous teacher talk and provide immediate feedback and reinforcement.

A variety of published materials concerned with listening activities and games are also available to teachers. David and Elizabeth Russell (1959) have collected 190 listening activities in their book, Listening Aids Through the Grades. These are listed by general school levels. Lists of references and materials for teachers are also provided, including audio-visual aids. Wagner, Hosier and Blackman (1960) have published a collection of Listening Games, presented in order of difficulty. Among the activities which are "easy to play" are games in which children listen for sound, rhyming games, and memory games. Games which "challenge top intellects include activities designed to give practice in listening intently in order to identify the common meters used in poetry, or to listen attentively in order to associate names of well-known authors with titles of their books. All games are classified by specific grade level. Listening activities and games are also listed in many professional tests in reading and the other language arts.

Skill exercises are provided in such independent materials as the Reading Laboratory published by Science Research Associates, and the Listen and Read Program developed by Educational Development Laboratory (EDL). While these materials are prepared for individualized instruction, they can also be used with small or large class groupings. EDL has recently published a new developmental program in the area of listening, the Listen and Think Program. Designed to improve listening comprehension and specific thinking skills necessary for good listening, the program covers reading levels three through twelve, and includes a series of fifteen tape recordings with an accompanying student lesson book for each level. Speeded listening or compressed speech activities are also included.

The provision of listening experiences in functional communications situations can be made through such generally accepted language arts activities as conversation, telephoning, discussion, reporting, planning and evaluation activities, poetry and choral speaking, preparing announcements, preparing and performing in programs and assemblies, and the like.

While evaluation of instruction is as essential in listening as in any other content area, the development of standardized instruments for the measurement of growth in listening knowledges and skills has been slow. Perhaps the principal reasons for this delay have been the lack of research into the specific skills and abilities

necessary for good listening, as well as into the factors within these skills which are measurable with standardized instruments. Research attention is currently being directed to this area. However, there are several available standardized listening tests which, while their reliability and validity may be questionable for research purposes, can serve as a useful guide to the classroom teacher in evaluating pupils' listening skills.

One standardized test for use at all grade levels from fourth up, is the Listening section of the Sequential Tests of Educational Progress (STEP), published by Educational Testing Service. This instrument is available in four levels, grades 4-6, 7-9, 10-12, 13-14, and includes items relating to skills in listening comprehension, interpretation, evaluation, and application.

Another standardized test, for use at the secondary level and above, is the Brown-Carlson Listening Comprehension Test, published by World Book Company. This test attempts to measure these separate listening abilities: (1) immediate recall; (2) following directions; (3) recognizing transitions; (4) recognizing word meanings; and (5) lecture comprehension.

Informal tests can be prepared by teachers based on the objectives and content of listening lessons. Those listening factors tested in research studies in listening are also a good source of content for both instruction and evaluation. For example, in a study

designed to investigate those factors in tests which measure the degree to which spoken passages or short talks are properly understood, the investigator (Spearritt, 1962) selected those factors he believed were likely to be involved in listening comprehension. He then adapted or developed test instruments based on these factors. Included were such areas as following directions concerned with lists of letters or numbers, rapid spelling, listening to haphazard speech and illogical groupings, determining consequences, word memory, listening vocabulary, listening to short talks, and the like.

One final note concerning instruction involves the teacher's role in the listening process. To the extent that teachers are negligent about their own speaking and listening habits, effective instruction in listening may be difficult if not impossible to provide. Green and Petty (1967) suggest a series of questions with which teachers might well be concerned if they are going to provide successful instruction in listening. These include: Is it because of ME that children do not pay attention? Could they be shutting me out for some reason? Am I defeating good listening by talking too much? Do I use changes in pitch, loudness, and rate in my own speech? Do I give children time to think when I ask questions--to find the answer to one question before another is asked? Do I try not to repeat what each child says but rather require the group to concentrate on the speaker? If the teacher is indeed a model for the child in instruction, then these questions are certainly appropriate and require careful consideration.

IN CONCLUSION

The media explosion has forced educators to take a new look at listening as an instructional task. What we have discovered is that we know a great deal of significance about listening, but we have only scratched the surface. We do not know how to isolate and measure listening ability validly and reliably, and we therefore have difficulty planning, initiating, and evaluating instruction. Nevertheless, many teachers are successfully teaching and improving listening skills, even though we may not know why they are successful.

Events go on and instruction must keep pace. Already, a variety of new technological developments has carried us beyond direct classroom instruction in listening and into areas we would not have dreamed possible twenty years ago. Many people are now learning through telelectures--where an amplifier and speaker system is hooked into a telephone line so that entire classes miles away can hear a lecture by a prominent person in a specialized field and direct questions to that person. Computer assisted instruction involves the use of a computer as a flexible teaching machine, utilizing speaking and listening on a highly sophisticated and interactive level. Techniques have been established or are in the research phases in which the output of tape recordings can be presented at a considerably greater rate of speed without speech distortion. The results of experiments with time compressed speech indicate that the comprehension of speeded listening

materials can be significantly improved with very small amounts of practice.

There is little question that educational technology will change the way in which people learn as well as the amounts of knowledge which they can learn and retain. Technological approaches to instruction require that communication skills be well taught from the start of the child's educational career. Listening is basic to all learning, and especially to learning through the new and developing methodologies.

Listening is now an instructional imperative. The teaching of listening will become even more of an imperative as our technological society continues to develop.

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